



EPA Celebrates Children's Health Month

October 2001

Children represent twenty-five percent of our population but 100% of our future. At EPA, protecting children from environmental health risks is fundamental to our vision of making the world a better place for future generations.

Children are not little adults. They may be at greater risk from harmful environmental pollutants because they behave differently than adults and are more vulnerable physically:



- Children's neurological, immunological, digestive, and other bodily systems are still developing;
- Children eat more food, drink more fluids, and breathe more air in proportion to their body weight than adults;
- Children's behavior patterns - such as crawling and placing objects in their mouths - may result in greater exposure to environmental contaminants; and
- Because of these characteristics, children may not be sufficiently protected by regulatory standards that are based on risks to adults.

In addition, increases in certain childhood illnesses thought to be affected by environmental exposures are on the rise, including asthma and some developmental disorders.

Like all of us, children need clean air to breathe, clean water to drink and safe food to eat. During Children's Health Month, EPA will feature its efforts to protect children from environmental harm. What follows is a sampling of EPA activities to protect children.

Help Children Breathe Easier

The number of children with asthma in the U.S. has more than doubled in the past two decades and an estimated 10 million school days are missed due to asthma related illness each year.



- **Diesel Rule:** EPA's new rule will reduce emissions of air pollutants to prevent 117,000 cases of acute bronchitis in children and will help avoid more than 360,000 asthma attacks and 380,000 cases of respiratory symptoms in asthmatic children per year.

- **Tools for Schools:** EPA has developed *IAQ Tools for Schools* Kit, an easy-to-use guide intended to support schools in preventing and resolving indoor air quality problems. As a result, over 10,000 schools have taken steps to improve their indoor air quality.

Protect Children from Lead Poisoning

Lead poisoning in children may cause lowered intelligence, impaired hearing, hyperactivity, and other health repercussions. Almost one million American children have elevated blood lead levels.

- **Lead Hazard Reduction:** EPA spends \$7 million annually on establishment, enforcement and compliance of lead hazard reduction regulations, and public education.

Keep Pesticides and Other Toxic Chemicals Away from Children

Children can be exposed to pesticides in their diets and drinking water, or through activities at home, play, and school. Unintentional exposures to pesticides may lead to adverse effects such as cancer, neurological and lung damage, reproductive dysfunction, and possibly dysfunction of the endocrine and immune systems.

- **Pesticide Registration:** EPA is assessing the dietary risks to infants and children when registering and re-registering uses of pesticides on foods.
- **Integrated Pest Management:** EPA is supporting schools in their efforts to minimize pesticide use, choose pesticides that are least toxic, and increase the use of non-chemical approaches, such as good housekeeping and preventive maintenance.

Protect from Too Much Sun

Over exposure to the sun's ultraviolet radiation can contribute to serious health problems, such as skin cancer, cataracts, immune system suppression. Children are a particular concern since an average of 80% of a person's lifetime sun exposure occurs before the age of 18.

- **SunWise:** EPA recognizes the need for heightened sun safety awareness in order to protect children from harmful UV rays and has developed the SunWise School Program. Currently 1,675 schools in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington D.C. are participating in the SunWise Program.



Protect Children from Contaminated Fish and Polluted Water

Children's exposure to waterborne contaminants can occur when eating contaminated fish, drinking contaminated water, or swimming in contaminated water bodies.



- **Beaches:** EPA recently made nearly \$2 million in grants available to coastal and Great Lakes states to improve monitoring and public notification of human health risks at beaches.
- **Fish Advisories:** EPA has issued national advice on mercury in freshwater fish for women who are or may become pregnant, nursing mothers, and young children.

Increase Understanding of the Relationship Between Environmental Contaminants and Childhood Diseases and Developmental Problems

Although scientific evidence shows that children are different than adults and data show increases in certain environmentally-related childhood illnesses, significant gaps exist in our understanding of the role that environmental contaminants play in causing or exacerbating childhood diseases and developmental disorders.

- **Research:** EPA spends nearly \$20 million annually to improve the science which includes Eight Centers for Children's Environmental Health and Disease Prevention Research, jointly funded by EPA and the Department of Health and Human Services.



Identify, Prevent, and Manage Environmentally-Related Illnesses in Children



Health Care Providers receive little or no training about health problems related to the environment and thus are not able to respond to requests from the public about the prevention and treatment of environmentally-related illnesses.

- **Continuing Education:** EPA currently provides more than \$600,000 to organizations that provide continuing education and fellowship opportunities to health professionals in pediatric environmental health.

- **Pediatric Environmental Health Units:** EPA and DHHS fund 10 units around the country that are equipped with experts that share information with health care providers and the public on environmental exposures and children's health effects and, in

some cases, will consult with practicing pediatricians and see patients.

Train the Next Generation of Child Health Protectors

Youth involvement in the recycling movement created a culture change in the way we manage our trash. Very few programs teach youth about things they can do to protect their health from environmental contaminants.

- **Youth Programs:** EPA is working with youth-based organizations, representing nearly 15 million youth, to incorporate children's environmental health into their ongoing programs. Organizations have created badges, workshops, and community-based modules that focus specifically on children's environmental health protection. These programs teach youth how to protect and promote their health.



Protect Children Beyond Our Borders

Children's environmental health issues span the globe and know no political boundaries. The priorities of developed countries may not be the same as those in developing countries, but they are similar enough to warrant international cooperation and collaboration, for technical, scientific, economic, and moral reasons. Around the world, poor environmental quality is responsible for 25% of all the preventable ill health. (World Health Organization, 1997)



- **Safe Drinking Water:** EPA provides technical assistance, laboratory capacity building, drinking water program management training, and funds source water protection projects to assist other countries in building a safe drinking water supply.

Summary

Children, by their very nature, deserve our continuous attention. Protecting the health of children is a compelling inducement to improving our environment, and through research, our understanding of the nexus between our health and our environment continues to grow. EPA celebrates

Children's Health Month during October, but will continue its efforts on behalf of children throughout the year and in the years ahead.